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Byron and the Difficulty of Beginning

Abstract

The beginnings of Byron's longer poems reveal a number of anxieties about the poetic act of beginning. He dealt with these concerns in several ways: revising opening lines, using translations from other poets to begin his poems, repurposing lines he had written in another context, multiplying prefatory paratexts, or asking other people to make decisions about how his poems should begin. His poetic beginnings reflect a concern about whether his poems would find well-informed and sympathetic readers, and they are often concerned with what his readers can be expected to know. In his later poems, however, Byron overcame some of these anxieties as he developed a different understanding of beginnings. *Beppo* and *Don Juan* are sustained by beginning gestures, which recur repeatedly throughout the poems. These beginnings reflect the poems' openness to contingency, which tends to make all beginnings necessarily provisional, in life as in art.

Byron was a poet who had trouble beginning his poems. Not that he had trouble starting to write, or wrestled with writers' block, or stared for hours at a blank page. He wrote rapidly and fluently, drafting *The Bride of Abydos* in four days and *The Corsair* in ten, and writing three cantos of *Don Juan* in as many months in 1823. He did not experience long dry spells between moments of inspiration, but began new poems often, and published regularly throughout his writing life, despite his occasional claims to have given up authorship and his statements that he did not consider poetry to be his vocation. The problem was not beginning to write a poem, but writing the poem's beginning. Byron often returned to the beginnings of his poems, revising and adding to them. He also employed a range of paratexts that complicated the beginnings of his longer poems, including subtitles, dedications, advertisements, prefaces, proems, and epigraphs. The frequency with which he revisited, added to, or complicated the beginnings of his poems suggests the extent to which the poetic act of beginning was one fraught with difficulty for him. But over time Byron's difficulty with writing beginnings led him to make beginning a central concern of his poetry, both as a poetic necessity and as an existential condition.

The beginning of any work of writing is an especially conspicuous part of it, and so writers often devote special attention to how a work begins. Beginnings are momentous, but

also arbitrary. It can be difficult to explain why a narrative (*syuzhet*) should begin where it does, since the story it tells (*fabula*) will always extend back before the beginning of its telling as well as forwards from it. Byron translated, in *Hints from Horace* (1811), Horace's observation that *The Iliad* began not *ab ovo*, but *in medias res*, opening with a quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon that takes place nine years after the siege of Troy began.¹ In one sense, this starting-point is an arbitrary one. The epic poem's *syuzhet* could have dived into the flow of its *fabula* at any point, before filling in, at a later stage in the telling, information about occurrences before the narrative's beginning. Returning to Horace's observation at the beginning of *Don Juan*, Byron noted how 'Most epic poets plunge *in medias res* [...] / And then your hero tells whene'er you please / What went before by way of episode' (1.6). In another sense, however, the *Iliad*'s opening episode is anything but arbitrary, because the quarrel over Briseis provides a smaller-scale version of the quarrel over Helen, and therefore introduces key ideas of the epic that will follow. Faced with questions about the right way to begin, and how the beginning relates to what follows, Byron briskly rejects Horace's prescription ('That is the usual method, but not mine') and claims that 'My way is to begin with the beginning' (1.7).

Beginning implies continuation, and is therefore a declaration of intent to continue in a certain way. To be coherent, a beginning must contain some sense of the work it begins. This is not to say that it has to explain what will follow from it, at the level of the plot or otherwise, but to recognise that any beginning has to suggest to the reader that what is coming will unfold in a way that connects it coherently to this particular beginning. In this respect, whether or not a beginning foreshadows what comes after, it sets up the expectations that will operate on the rest of the work. The writer may fulfil those expectations or frustrate them, but he or she cannot avoid creating them. It is in the nature of an artistic beginning to establish at some level the conventions and parameters within which the work will operate. Concerns about genre, audience and authority therefore tend to cluster around the beginning of a work.²

While these concerns impinge on all writers to some degree, there were some additional factors that made them especially acute in the Romantic period. These provide the context for the complexities readers encounter at the beginning of many Romantic works. Frame narratives begin novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (to name only one example of Scott's constant use of this device), or

James Hogg's *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Many gothic novels, from *The Castle of Ontranto* onwards, open with the discovery of a mysterious manuscript or printed book. Latin epigraphs appear before such important Romantic poems as Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' and Wordsworth's 'Intimations' ode. Prose prefaces introduce poems such as Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and plays such as Percy Shelley's *The Cenci*, as well as volumes of poetry such as (most famously) Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. To begin reading literature of the Romantic period, then, is to be confronted with a wide repertoire of prefatory gestures.

These opening gambits may have been responding to a particular set of historical factors that affected attitudes towards beginning literary works in this period. The French Revolution inaugurated the possibility of a rupture with the past that felt unprecedented and ramified widely, placing all kinds of old continuities under threat. Thinking about beginning any important project in this period was likely inflected at some level by the example of this Revolutionary act of beginning, including creating a new calendar.³ But, conversely, the Romantics were beset by a feeling of historical belatedness, which made it seem that any beginning was necessarily a recapitulation of something that had gone before. Beginning was therefore a focus for concerns about originality. Finally, the upsurge in the total output of printed matter, and the growth of an increasingly large readership for it, created a widespread sense that the market for new books was overloaded.⁴ This put particular pressure on beginnings to hook and hold the reader's attention, in an environment where he or she could easily put down one book and pick up another.

When Byron was working on the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, he sent his publisher John Murray 'the shaft of the column as a specimen [...] – i.e. the first stanza'.⁵ The first stanza offers a bold beginning: 'I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs, / A palace and a prison on each hand'.⁶ Murray showed the stanza to his advisors William Gifford, John Hookham Frere and 'many more', and encouraged Byron to finish the work.⁷ The beginning of the poem functioned for the publisher and his advisors as it would for its potential purchasers. It offered a sample of what was to follow, an indication of its nature and a guarantee of its quality. Having received Murray's encouragement, Byron began to negotiate the price the publisher would pay for the copyright. The fact that Byron sent the first stanza, detached from the rest of the poem, to open this negotiation, suggests the importance of poetic beginnings in this period both artistically and commercially.

Byron often returned to the beginnings of his longer poems and reworked them in an effort to manage the concerns that gathered around beginnings. When revising the first canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), he added a new first stanza at a late stage in the process. It employed the classical invocation of the muse: 'Oh, thou! in Hellas deemed of heavenly birth, / Muse!' (1.1). But it maintained an ironic distance from the convention, describing the muse as 'formed or fabled at the Minstrel's will' (1.1). It also acknowledged Byron's sense of historical belatedness, asserting that the muse had been 'shamed full oft by later lyres' and describing the poem as a 'lowly lay' unworthy of her attention (1.1). By adding this stanza to the beginning of the poem, Byron signalled how his conception of it had changed during the process of writing. The first stanza from the manuscript version (the second stanza in the published version), had employed mock-archaic words such as 'Whilome', 'wight', and 'wassailers' to signpost its burlesque Spenserianism and introduce a comic strand in the poem designed gently to mock Byron and some of his friends (1.2). This way of beginning not longer seemed adequate in light of the revisions Byron had made to the poem. It was displaced from pole position by a new first stanza exhibiting a classicizing vocabulary. The two versions of the poem's beginning employed two linguistic registers and envisaged two kinds of continuation, with diverging expectations, conventions, and audiences. Byron revisited the poem's beginning, creating a new moment of beginning without cancelling the original one, and thus embedded in its opening gestures mixed messages about the poem that was to follow.⁸

When writing and revising the beginnings of his longer poems, Byron often tried to displace responsibility for beginning in some way. He sometimes began poems with a close imitation of someone else's poetry, as though he could prop his own poetic beginning on another poet's artistry. *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) begins with a couplet closely modelled on lines from Juvenal's *Satire I*, which Byron quoted in a footnote (*CPW* I. 399). This choice signals the poem's claim to an authority based in classical education. It also functions as a genre marker, alerting readers that this is a Juvenalian satire rather than a Horatian or Menippean one. It thus makes clear from the outset that this poem is aimed at an audience able to appreciate classical imitations and relish slashing invective. Translating Latin poetry as an opening gesture is an act of filiation that asserts authority, while also displacing it onto a classical precursor. It positions Byron as a latter-day Juvenal, but it also provides a way of beginning that draws on existing lines of poetry rather than requiring new

ones. The secondary, imitative creativity of translation smoothed the path to writing original poetry.

Byron used this technique again in *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), which begins with a free translation of lines from Mignon's song 'Kennst du das Land', in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Here Byron pays a concealed tribute to an admired older contemporary. (He would later make a public tribute when he dedicated *Sardanapalus* to 'the illustrious Goethe' in 1821.) Beginning in this way uses Goethe's poetry as a warm-up for Byron's own, inserting without acknowledgement some lines of translation before the reader encounters original poetry. This displaces the need to begin, again allowing a translation to provide a stepping-stone to get the poem started. The tactic effectively splits the difficult task of beginning in two: first Byron starts writing, and then he starts writing original poetry. In both *English Bards* and *The Bride of Abydos*, another writer's words, in a different language, provide support for the poem's opening lines.

At the beginning of other poems, Byron turned not to another poet's lines, but to lines that he had already written himself in another context. To begin the third canto of *The Corsair* (1814), he lifted a passage of 54 lines from *The Curse of Minerva*, a poem he had privately printed, but which he had given up any plans of publishing.⁹ The lines are a description of sunset over Athens, which makes the speaker recall the death of Socrates. In *The Curse of Minerva*, these lines began the poem and introduced the speaker's vision of Minerva, who appears to him to pronounce her curse on Lord Elgin for removing the Parthenon marbles. Faced with the difficulty of beginning *The Corsair*, canto three, Byron recruited a poetic beginning that he had already made elsewhere, displacing the task of beginning onto his own earlier self. Doing so produced a palpable sense of embarrassment. The first new lines of poetry he wrote for the canto acknowledged the difficulty of integrating the borrowed beginning with the rest: 'Not now my theme – why turn my thoughts to thee?' (3.55). He added an endnote to the first edition admitting that:

The opening lines, as far as section II, have, perhaps, little business here, and were annexed to an unpublished (though printed) poem; but they were written on the spot, in the Spring of 1811, and – I scarce know why – the reader must excuse their appearance here if he can. (*CPW*, III, 448)

The first original lines that Byron wrote for the third canto of *The Corsair* are thus not a beginning, but a transitional passage of eleven lines that serves to link his borrowed beginning to the resumption of the poem's narrative in the third numbered section. Conscripting his earlier poetry eased the difficulty of beginning the canto, but this decision left its mark on the poem in an awkward transition and an apologetic endnote.

Something comparable happened at the beginning of *Parisina* (1816). Having drafted seven rhyming couplets describing an evening scene to open the poem, Byron extracted them from the manuscript and published them on their own as a quasi-sonnet in *Hebrew Melodies* (1815). In this case, the lines didn't become a new beginning, but a lyric in their own right. Byron subsequently returned to *Parisina* and published it just eight months after *Hebrew Melodies*. For many of *Parisina*'s first readers, then, the opening lines appeared to have been lifted from Byron's most recent collection of poems. Murray inserted an endnote to explain that 'the lines contained in Section I were printed as set to music some time since: but belonged to the poem where they now appear' (CPW, III, 490-1). Unlike his procedure in *The Corsair*, Byron was not in this case turning to his unpublished manuscripts in search of help with beginning a poem or poem section. But the fact that Byron reused lines from the beginning of both *The Curse of Minerva* and *Parisina* shows that he worked so hard on opening lines that he was reluctant to leave them unpublished even when he had abandoned (sometimes only temporarily) his plans to publish the poems from which they came.

The fact that these introductory lines could be extracted from one poem and inserted in another suggests how tenuous their connection was to the poems they began. Rather than plunging directly into the action of the narrative, or introducing its characters, these opening passages tend to dwell on scene setting. The narrative then begins at a later point, often in a separate numbered section. By adopting this approach, Byron doubled the moment of beginning, not only as a result of the revisions described above, but also by separating generalised scene-setting descriptions from the beginning of the plot. *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, and *Parisina* all begin in this way. *Lara* (1814), unusually, begins its narrative with very little scene-setting preamble. But Byron also wrote an alternative, scene-setting beginning for *Lara*: this twenty-five-line fragment was titled 'Opening Lines to Lara' in his manuscript, but it does not seem to have been sent to the publisher, and was not published until the twentieth century (CPW III, 256-7, 452). Byron's technique in all these examples splits the beginning of the poem from the beginning of the story. It acts as another

form of displacing, allowing Byron to relieve the pressure on the moment of beginning by spreading the work of beginning across several moments of writing.

As well as displacing responsibility for beginning onto other poets, whose words he could translate, or onto his earlier self, whose words he could repurpose, Byron also tried to displace the responsibility onto other people. While *The Siege of Corinth* was in the press, Byron had second thoughts about the beginning, and sent an alternative opening section of 45 lines to be fitted to the front of the poem. He told Murray that this had been ‘written some time ago, and intended as an opening to the *Siege of Corinth*’.¹⁰ Like his late revisions to the beginning of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the new lines were designed not to replace the existing beginning but to appear before it, creating two moments of beginning, or turning the lines that were initially conceived as the poem’s beginning into a continuation of the new lines that would appear before them. But if Byron was unsure about his first attempt to begin *Siege*, he was no more confident about his second effort. ‘I [...] am not sure that they had not better be left out’, he wrote, and he left it to ‘you & your Synod’ to choose.¹¹ Murray and his advisors felt that the poem was better without the new lines, and Byron deferred to their judgement.¹² In this example, Byron allowed someone else to make the crucial decision about how to begin the poem on his behalf.

Byron also vacillated over the beginning of *The Corsair*, and deferred to someone else’s judgement. In this case it was the dedicatory letter to Thomas Moore that caused him to think twice, rather than the beginning of the poem itself. Byron wrote a long dedication in prose, praising Moore and alluding to his views on Irish politics, as well as discussing Byron’s own poetry to date and declaring his intention to take a hiatus from publishing for ‘some years’ (*BLJ* IV, 12). Murray cautioned Byron about the political tone of the letter and Byron wrote another version that was much shorter and less political.¹³ But rather than substitute this for the first version, he sent both letters to Moore and asked him to choose between them (*BLJ* IV, 18-19). Moore favoured the first, longer version and Byron insisted that this version should be published (*CPW* III, 148-50). When writing the beginnings of both *The Siege of Corinth* and *The Corsair*, then, Byron deferred to other people’s opinions about how best to handle the opening gestures of these works. Like his use of translations or repurposed lines of poetry at the beginnings of other poems, this practice served to shift responsibility for beginning away from the poet, and so helped to mitigate the anxieties that beginnings aroused.

The dedicatory letter that appeared with *The Corsair* was only one of many paratexts that appeared at the beginnings of Byron's poems. He often multiplied paratexts, so that readers approach many of his longer poems through thickets of prefatory material. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the title is followed by a subtitle ('A Romaunt'), an epigraph, a prose preface, an 'addition to the preface' (added in the fourth edition), the prefatory poem 'To Ianthe' (added in the seventh edition), and the heading 'Canto One' before the opening stanza. *Don Juan* similarly opens with a proliferation of prefatory gestures. The title is followed by an epigraph, a prose preface that parodies Wordsworth's note to 'The Thorn' (not published until 1901), a verse dedication to Robert Southey (not published until 1833) and the heading 'Canto One' before the first stanza. In both cases, Byron returned repeatedly to the opening pages of these books, reimagining what they would look like several times. He added new material to the beginning of *Childe Harold* in the fourth and seventh editions. He rejected his first idea for *Don Juan*'s epigraph ('*domestica facta*') as a result of the misgivings expressed by this friend John Cam Hobhouse, and considered having no epigraph at all before settling on the published one ('*difficile est proprie communia dicere*'). He wrote the dedication to Southey, then set it aside and wrote the prose preface, which he also set aside. At the beginning of Byron's two greatest poems, then, he rethought and revisited the opening paratexts, adding new dimensions to the work's opening, rejecting existing paratexts and writing new ones. This has the effect of displacing the moment of beginning and multiplying what Gérard Genette named the 'thresholds of interpretation'.¹⁴ When does the reader really begin reading *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan*? At the title page, the epigraph, the preface, the introductory poetry, or not until the reader has worked through all of these (or skipped over them) and settled down to the opening lines of the first canto? Proliferating paratexts complicates the beginnings of these poems, but it also reduces the pressure on any one moment of writing to launch the poem successfully.

This tendency to decentre the moment of beginning by surrounding it with other moments of beginning was a common one in the verse tales and other longer poems Byron wrote between *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*. They all begin with some permutation of paratexts, including title, subtitle, epigraph, dedication, prose 'advertisement', preface or note. The most extensive combinations of paratexts occur in the earlier tales. *The Giaour* (1813) begins with a title, subtitle, epigraph, dedication, and advertisement before the opening lines of poetry. *The Corsair* (1814) starts with a title, subtitle, epigraph, dedication, and an epigraph to the first canto before the first lines of poetry. All the other tales draw on

the same repertoire of prefatory materials. Byron might have been sensitised to the importance of getting these prefatory materials right, because his earliest attempts to deploy them had gone disastrously wrong. Henry Brougham's review of *Hours of Idleness* (1807) attacked at length the title page formulation 'By George Gordon, Lord Byron, A Minor' and the prose preface in which Byron had stressed his nobility and his youth in an effort to deflect critical assaults.¹⁵ But the fact that Byron continued to use prefatory paratexts so extensively, despite Brougham's strictures, suggests how much he relied on them as tools to facilitate poetic beginnings.

While prefatory materials facilitated the task of beginning for the poet, they also complicated it for the reader. The 'advertisements' that Byron prefixed to his tales often identified their source material. In doing so, they raised questions about the relationship between the beginning of the narrative in this poem and its origin in another piece of writing. *The Giaour's* advertisement sketched in some historical background and noted that the tale was 'founded upon circumstances now less common in the East than formerly' (CPW III, 39). *Lara's* identified it as a kind of sequel to *The Corsair* (CPW III, 453). *The Siege of Corinth's* consists entirely of a long quotation from a history book about Turkey, with a footnote describing Byron's travels in the region (CPW III, 322). *Parisina's* locates the poem's source in a story recounted in Gibbon's miscellaneous works, from which it quotes (CPW III, 358). *The Prisoner of Chillon* provides a note to its introductory sonnet giving information about Bonnivard from a history of Geneva, which it quotes in French (CPW IV, 450-1). *Mazeppa's* argument provides a source for the story in several passages quoted in French from Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII* (CPW IV, 173). *The Island's* identifies the tale's source in Bligh's *Narrative of the Mutiny on the Bounty* (CPW VII, 26). In every case, Byron uses the prefatory material to point back before the beginning of the poem that the reader is about to begin, locating its origins in some other written text. The imminent poetic beginning is set against an antecedent prose origin. This provides another way to displace the moment of beginning, or to proliferate beginnings in order to manage the apprehensiveness that beginning engenders.

These advertisements provided readers with further reading, but also with *prior* reading. They directed those readers who enjoyed the poem to other texts that would tell them more about the events, people or settings that inspired it. But they also hinted that the poem could only be fully appreciated by those who already had some knowledge of these

things. They therefore reflected a common anxiety associated with beginning a literary work: the difficulty of deciding what kind of knowledge to take for granted in the audience. Stanley Fish shows how Milton expertly dispatches this difficulty in the first line of ‘Lycidas’: ‘Yet once more, O ye laurels’.¹⁶ Addressing the laurel trees signals clearly that this is a pastoral elegy, and so it calls at the outset for an audience already familiar with the conventions of that genre. Readers gain that familiarity from other examples of the pastoral elegy, and so to write for this kind of informed reader is always to begin ‘yet once more’. To begin a poem is always and necessarily to begin again, to speak up amidst a crowd of other poems that are speaking already, and to offer the reader a new version of something that he or she has heard before. To begin entails holding some conception of who will be engaged by this beginning.

In the Romantic period, however, doing this – formulating a conception of the audience implied by a poetic beginning – arguably became more difficult. The rapidly enlarging readership of the period, and the perception that a mass audience was emerging (even if this perception sometimes ran ahead of the facts), produced a specific set of worries about what readers could be expected to know.¹⁷ Providing prefatory matter that outlined what readers needed to know before the start of the poem provided one way to address this concern. But several of Byron’s poems also take it up obliquely in their opening lines. *The Bride of Abydos*, for example, begins by asking readers what they know: ‘Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle / Are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime?’ (1.1-2). Like the opening lines of ‘Lycidas’, these lines use trees to signal generic affiliation, identifying the poem as a ‘Turkish Tale’ (its subtitle) and prompting the reader to expect ‘deeds’ of passion and violence appropriate to the genre. But casting the opening as a question (following the model in Goethe’s lyric) also reveals a submerged concern about what, exactly, the reader can be relied upon to know. Very few of Byron’s readers shared his first-hand knowledge of the tale’s setting, and he couldn’t necessarily assume that they were familiar with the generic conventions it invoked. The beginning of this poem can therefore be read as asking what kind of readerly knowledge the poem can take for granted. Byron returned to this problem several times in different ways. Where *The Bride of Abydos* starts by asking readers what they know, *Don Juan*, canto six, begins by telling them what they know: “‘There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which taken at the flood” – you know the rest’ (6.1). And *Beppo* begins by telling readers what they *should* know about the Venetian carnival – “’Tis known, at least it should be’ (1) – before going on to tell them about it

anyway. In all these cases, the beginning of the poem betrays Byron's concern with what his readers can be expected to know.

By the time he got to *Beppo*, however, beginning had taken on a different importance for Byron. It was no longer simply a challenge to overcome; it had become a key resource sustaining the poem's comic aplomb. In *Beppo*, opening gestures are not confined to the beginning of the poem, but recur throughout. As in the tales mentioned above, Byron separates the beginning of the poem from the beginning of its narrative. But whereas in the earlier poems this is a way to ease into the beginning of the narrative, in *Beppo* it becomes part of a running joke about the narrator's inability to get the story started. Twenty-one stanzas out of the poem's ninety-nine have passed before the speaker says 'But to my story' (21), and this beginning gesture is one that has to be renewed repeatedly as the digressive narrator seeks to get his narrative back on track. 'But to my tale of Laura' he says at the poem's exact mid-point (50). And again, close to two-thirds of the way through the poem, 'To turn – and to return – the devil take it! / This story slips forever through my fingers' (63). In common with many of Byron's earlier poems, then, *Beppo* has some difficulty beginning. But with the turn to comic ottava rima, this difficulty has ceased to be a liability and has become instead a poetic resource, borrowed in part from the comic digressions of *Tristram Shandy* – another work comically concerned with the difficulty of beginning, which Byron acknowledged as a model for *Don Juan*.¹⁸

Like *Beppo*, *Don Juan* proliferates beginning gestures throughout the poem, but on a much larger scale. Its sixteen completed cantos offer sixteen distinct occasions on which to begin or re-begin the poem. The fact that Byron intends to approach these beginnings playfully, with self-reflexive and self-deprecating irony, is apparent from the opening of Canto Three. This is the first time the poem resumes in a new publication, as the first two cantos were published together. The canto's opening – 'Hail Muse! et cetera. We left Juan sleeping' (3.1) – reprises the ironic invocation of the Muse at the beginning of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, while dispensing with the anxieties the earlier poem had betrayed. Nicholas Halmi calls it 'the most perfunctory [invocation] in the history of the epic'.¹⁹ We are now in a self-consciously belated comic epic, which hails not so much a muse as an audience for whom invocations of the muse are an outworn convention. *Don Juan* signals in its first gesture of re-beginning that it seeks an audience as knowing as its narrator. It is a measure of how far Byron has overcome his concerns about his readers' knowledge that by

the beginning of Canto Fourteen he can write ‘You know, or don’t know, that great Bacon saith, / “Fling up a straw, ’twill show the way the wind blows”’ (14.8). Here the readers’ knowledge has become a matter of indifference, not anxiety. Such moments of re-beginning will be repeated throughout the poem, not only at the beginning of new cantos, but elsewhere as well. It should come as no surprise to read one of them midway through Canto Twelve:

But now I will begin my poem. ’Tis
Perhaps a little strange, if not quite new,
That from the first of cantos up to this
I’ve not begun what we have to go through.
These first twelve books are merely flourishes,
Preludios, trying just a string or two
Upon my lyre or making the pegs sure;
And when so, you shall have the overture. (12.54)

As this makes clear, *Don Juan* is, in a sense, *all* beginning. Its beginning gestures are not confined to the beginning of the poem, or even to the beginning of each canto, but recur throughout as ironic ways of sustaining the poem’s energies.

Beginning has now become less a technical problem and more an existential condition. If *Don Juan* is a poem that cannot stop beginning, that is impelled to keep beginning again, this is because it presents a world in which the condition of beginning is pervasive. All human endeavours in *Don Juan* are provisional and likely to be diverted from their intended courses by the force of circumstances. This can be seen in the many characters whose plans go awry in the poem: Julia, Haidée, Raucocanti, John Johnson and many others. It is also true of the narrator, whose plans are laid out at the end of Canto One and include ‘twelve books’ and ‘a panoramic view of hell’ that never comes to pass. In the world of *Don Juan*, then, beginning any project in the expectation of bringing it to a conclusion is unlikely to meet with success. Instead, the poem’s characters and its narrator are compelled continually to re-begin, and to accept that their plans must remain provisional.²⁰ In Canto Twelve, Byron cheerfully acknowledges ‘The plan at present’s simply in concoction’ (12.87).

To begin in the poem is therefore a hopeful gesture, carried out in the knowledge that all efforts to begin are likely to be truncated. This does not, however, produce an impasse in which nothing is attempted because nothing goes to plan. Rather, *Don Juan* cultivates an

optimistic approach to beginnings, in which the need to revise one's projects and begin again can be met with equanimity. This understanding comes into focus at the beginning of Canto Fifteen, which provides another playfully self-reflexive opening:

Ah! What should follow slips from my reflection.

Whatever follows ne'ertheless may be

As apropos of hope or retrospection

As though the lurking thought had followed free.

All present life is but an interjection,

An 'oh!' or 'ah!' of joy or misery

Or a 'ha, ha!' or 'bah!' a yawn or 'pooh!'

Of which perhaps the latter is most true. (15.1)

While getting the canto off to a comic start, this stanza accepts the constructed nature of all artistic beginnings. Any decision to begin at a particular point, in a particular way, will be arbitrary at some level, and so an alternative beginning may be just as 'apropos'. To begin purposefully entails some intention to continue in a particular way, but this stanza lists involuntary starts that skirt the edge of intentional speech. The yawn is not intentional, any more than the 'syncopé' (faint) or 'singultus' (hiccup) added to the list in the following stanza (15.2). The laugh, the exclamations of joy or misery and the sceptical interjections 'bah' or 'pooh' may be intended or involuntary. The not-quite-words offered here as poetic beginnings thus call into question the kind of intention a beginning requires. The repeated use of 'follow' ('follow', 'follows', 'followed') underlines the ways in which beginnings structure expectations for what follows, but suggests that these expectations may be frustrated. The stanza then links this poetic problem to an existential condition: 'All present life is but an interjection'. In our 'present life', our efforts to begin are necessarily provisional, they may not be fully under our control, and the plans they inaugurate (artistic or otherwise) are necessarily subject to change, like the beginning of this canto, which does not go according to even the minimal plan its author made for it. Rather than being discouraged by this fact, however, the narrator insists that an alternative beginning will be just as good.

Those who fail to recognise the provisional nature of beginnings, and arrogantly expect to carry through the plans they have begun, are guilty of a sin of pride. As early as *Hints from Horace*, Byron advised 'Beware – for God's sake, don't begin like Bowles!' (194). William Bowles's fault was to have begun his poem *The Spirit of Discovery* with an

epic opening that promised more than he could deliver. Borrowing from Virgil, Bowles began ‘Awake a louder and a loftier strain!’, but Byron insisted that Bowles could not sustain his epic pretensions.²¹ Byron returned to the vanity of an over-confident beginning at the start of *Don Juan*, canto four, which begins ‘Nothing so difficult as a beginning / In poesy, unless perhaps the end’:

For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
The race, he sprains a wing and down we tend,
Like Lucifer when hurled from heaven for sinning.
Our sin the same, and hard as his to mend,
Being pride, which leads the mind to soar too far,
Till our own weakness shows us what we are. (4.1)

One reason that beginnings are difficult is because they always risk hubris. To begin any project is to assert a kind of agency in the world that you might not actually have. To begin is to lay claim to the ability to continue, and failing to continue in the way the beginning envisages reveals the tightly circumscribed nature of human agency, as well as the vanity of trying to overreach it. A key insight of *Don Juan*, then, is that the difficulty of creating a poetic beginning is only a specific case of a more general condition of provisionality.

Don Juan himself is well fitted for such a condition. For the most part he is content to be carried along on the stream of contingencies, without initiating any beginning of his own. Although he is not entirely passive, and can respond to circumstances decisively – for example when he shoots Tom the highwayman on Shooter’s Hill (11.13-20) – he never makes plans and begins executing them. Carried from one situation to another, Don Juan is always and never beginning: always beginning over again in response to changing situations, but never managing to instantiate any sustained programme of action. In this respect, he reflects the poem that bears his name, which is also always beginning, always remaining open to contingency, and always ready to adapt to circumstances.

For much of his writing life, beginnings posed a problem for Byron, generating a cluster of anxieties. He frequently returned to the beginnings of his poems before publication, adding to them, revising them, and worrying about their effectiveness. He employed several tactics to make beginning easier, which all sought in different ways to relieve the pressure of expectation on the opening lines of a poem. He displaced

responsibility for beginning onto another poet, whose words he could translate. He repurposed lines he had already written to serve as the beginnings of new poems. He deferred to the judgement of trusted advisors when making decisions about which version of a beginning would appear in print. He multiplied paratexts and prefatory gestures, proliferating moments of beginning and so making any one of those moments less conspicuous. He started poems with passages of scene-setting description, separating the opening of the poem and the beginning of its narrative. His beginnings revealed his anxiety about who would read his poems, and whether they shared his knowledge and range of reference.

But if the difficulty of beginning was initially a practical problem that Byron shared with other writers, over time it became a more individual concern, a self-reflexive subject of his poetry and a sustaining resource for it. *Beppo* and *Don Juan* do not only discuss the difficulty of beginning explicitly; they are kept going by the constant need to begin again and the impossibility of beginning so successfully that the beginning can be left behind. Multiplying and revisiting moments of beginning began as a compensatory tactic developed to handle the cluster of anxieties associated with finalising the opening of a work. But it became an artistic strategy sustaining the energy of Byron's longest poem. Where Byron had earlier revised moments of beginning, going back to the same opening lines several times, in *Don Juan* he restaged opening gestures throughout the poem in order to provide ways to start afresh while leaving earlier episodes behind. Byron made this shift as he developed an existential vision of a world characterised by contingency, in which all projects were necessarily provisional. Beginning, in this view, was no longer an artistic problem to be solved; it was now a fundamental, endlessly repeated necessity, in life as in art. Beginning had become an end in itself.

¹ *Hints from Horace*, 203. All quotations from Byron's poetry are from Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford, 1980-1993). Hereafter cited as *CPW*. Poems are cited by canto and stanza number or by line number, as appropriate; prefaces and other paratexts are cited by volume and page number.

² In thinking about beginnings, I am indebted to two seminal works on the subject: Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975) and A.D. Nuttall, *Openings: Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford, 1992).

³ Peter Fritzsche suggests that the French Revolution provided a model for other kinds of change, allowing them to be imagined as decisive ruptures with the past. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), esp. 25-32.

⁴ For an account of how changes in the literary marketplace affected literary production, see Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800-1850* (Baltimore, MD, 2000).

⁵ Byron to John Murray, 15 July 1817, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, edited by Leslie A. Marchand. 13 vols. (London, 1973-94), V, 251. Hereafter cited as *BLJ*. Byron is here remembering the story told by Hierocles the Stoic of a pedant who, when trying to sell his house, carried a stone from it as a specimen. Samuel Johnson, in his 'Preface to Shakespeare', likened critics who approach Shakespeare by selecting isolated quotations to Hierocles' pedant, and it was probably in this context that Byron encountered the story.

⁶ Later critics would, however, find faults with the stanza, noticing that the prospect Byron describes cannot be seen from the Bridge of Sighs itself, but from the adjacent Ponte della Paglia, and that to be grammatically accurate the second line should read 'on either hand' not 'on each hand'.

⁷ Murray to Byron 5 August 1817, in *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool, 2007), 233.

⁸ For a discussion of the revisions, see Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke, 2007), 44-6.

⁹ Byron had previously thought of publishing these lines as a stand-alone poem with one of the later editions of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. See Byron to Murray, 23 October 1812, *BLJ* II, 234-5.

¹⁰ Byron to Murray, 25 December 1815, *BLJ* IV, 337-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² The lines were first printed with the poem in 1832, and were then routinely reprinted throughout the nineteenth century. In *CPW*, Jerome McGann prints the lines separately, as 'Lines Associated with *The Siege of Corinth*' *CPW* III, 356-7.

¹³ The first version of the letter is in *BLJ* IV, 12-14, and the second *BLJ* IV, 18. See also Byron's letter to Murray, *BLJ* IV, 17.

¹⁴ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Levin (Cambridge, 1997).

¹⁵ Henry Brougham, review of Lord Byron, *Hours of Idleness*, in *The Edinburgh Review*, XI (Jan. 1808), 285-9.

¹⁶ Stanley Fish, 'Yet Once More' in *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 1-17 (esp. 4-8).

¹⁷ The anxieties aroused in Romantic writers by the emergence of an enlarged audience for poetry have been examined by Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge, 1999); Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford, 2000); and Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹⁸ 'I mean it for a poetical T. Shandy' *BLJ* X, 150.

¹⁹ Nicholas Halmi, 'The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem', *European Romantic Review*, 21.5 (2010), 589-600 (593).

²⁰ Here I draw on Jerome Christensen's reading of *Don Juan* as a poem that cultivates openness to contingency, making it 'fully circumstantial, subject to no master plan', Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), 215.

²¹ William Lisle Bowles, *The Spirit of Discovery; or, The Conquest of the Ocean* (London, 1804), 1.